

TRAVEL + LEISURE

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A New Direction

For **Marcia DeSanctis**, a midlife pivot opened up a world of adventure—and fulfillment.

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BANDON. This is the word we carry when we arrive somewhere else. To give ourselves over without restraint. It is a singular thrill, to pitch out of the satisfying but predictable

order of domestic life and into this state of disarray. We become vagabonds, searchers, giddy tourists.

How strange and wonderful it is to stash only the essentials into a bag and shut the door behind us. We lift off. We land somewhere across the world, sometimes alone. What, exactly, has been left behind? And what might lead us back home? Every arrival is a crash course in possibility, but being somewhere new does not always open a path to immediate clarity. Waiting for a bus under a battering sun or breathing the bug spray on a hotel pillow, we crave the safety of our old couch, the comfort of friends and family. But for me, comfort never endures. Restlessness prickles under my skin.

Traveling alone and writing about it is my work, a career I began at 50. It was a discovery at midlife, one that exposed both the escape and the adventure I craved as I confronted my life's second half. One that reached back to the most elemental part of me, the younger woman I once was, the child I had been.

In third grade, as soon as my mother allowed me to walk to the center of Winchester, Massachusetts, along a half-mile of flat, suburban streets, I always wanted to go alone. "Why don't you ask a friend to walk with you?" my mother would ask. But I didn't want a friend. Not then, and not now. I preferred to drift unaccompanied, unencumbered, and I grew intimate with my own



independence. Even then, I think I understood the restorative power, the joyous exuberance, of these stretches of time spent alone.

In my twenties and thirties, I traveled—for my work as a television journalist, for weddings, for the heck of it. And then I stopped. I gave up my career as a producer and media executive and moved with my husband and two young children to a rural New England town. During the next several years, I barely set foot on a plane. It was as if this phase of life erected a tough membrane I could not cross. During this time, home was where I belonged, where I needed to be.

Five years of dislocation later, I was in my mid-forties, the land of reckoning. Middle age was less an ebb and flow than a relentless tide. “Your children are all that matter” is the bromide foisted upon every woman as soon as she gives birth, a vague notion about the primacy of mothering above all else that is deeply embedded into our collective consciousness. But if my children were everything that mattered, what, then, was I?

The easiest and most satisfying way I could grapple with the crisis—the tsunamic love for my children that coexisted with my abundant sense of failure—was to try to be productive. In the daylight hours, I pecked out a novel from the driver’s seat of my car during the kids’ piano lessons (it never sold). I taught French. Finally, I enrolled in a master’s program in international relations. From the opening words of the first macroeconomics lecture, I was inspired in a way I had not been in decades. Through my courses in politics, trade, and humanitarian studies, the world had shown itself to me again.

After graduation, I could not find a job in policy or development. I knocked on doors in Washington, D.C., and if anyone bothered to open one, it was only to slam it shut again. Under the delusion that I could jump into a job as chief of staff to the Secretary General of the United Nations or as National Security Advisor to newly elected President Obama, I was left with a shattered ego and a school loan that I needed to pay back. Dispirited, unemployed, and on the cusp of 50, I sought a plan, and something else.

What I found was a voice.

Ideas began to pile up for essays and stories. I wrote them, and one after another I sent them out to editors. There were many rejections—then fewer, which felt like the beginning of something.

I began to travel again. I found myself in airports on my way somewhere, seeking an awakening and a story, gathering pearls for a necklace. On I went, scouring the planet for windows with infinite views. Once in a while, I would turn my lens back on myself and find meaning, self-knowledge—and, ultimately, a way home.

I leveraged everything I could to invest in my new career. I cashed in my 401(k). I sold a watch, maxed out a credit card, and asked my sisters for help. I booked one ticket and then another, always in pursuit

of a story. Now and always, travel imparts a liquid language whose sole property is the flow of questions.

Where will I find a pearl?

Since my first major magazine story was published, in my fiftieth year, I have written about 140 more. It is in travel writing that I find kernels of truth about the creative process, love, memory, purpose, devotion, aging. I am fortunate to have both a home to return to and work that allows me to travel. And when I do, I fully and gratefully grasp my privilege. A person who can measure life in journeys taken is lucky indeed. But there are enticing mysteries everywhere, even within the four walls of my house. The world is full of them.

It’s possible that such an existence, of comings and goings, of departure lounges and arrival gates, will become increasingly rare, and potentially more fraught. Burgeoning refugee crises caused by poverty and climate change are causing mass relocation, exposing the inequality between those who travel by plane, because they wish to, and those who travel on foot, because their survival depends on it. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated humanity’s existential worries and solidified a shared sense of

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paralysis. In addition, it has shined a light on what we’ve known for a long time: that travel can be risky, a vector for deadly contagions, and that it often exploits local populations and the global ecosystem. From carbon emissions to sunscreen residue on the planet’s coral reefs, our need to “get away” can be seen as selfish, unnecessary, and harmful.

And yet we as a species are designed to wander, to venture beyond our own valley into another, to cross oceans and mountain ranges. Whether we seek adventure, connection, beauty, solitude, togetherness, or nothing less than the meaning of life, travel is ultimately about human curiosity. Like love, curiosity is an engine that can change fate and move the tides. When we cast ourselves off from customary moorings and expose ourselves to other landscapes and people, we become empathetic, hopeful, worthy citizens.

For now, I will keep going, resolved to travel quietly and lightly, to listen, to observe, to be open to the grace of the universe, to awe and sublimity.

But I will always take the familiar path home. ●

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